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'Ruby and Oswald': The Accused Speak for Themselves

BY MITCH TUCHMAN

The real Jack Ruby fires a bullet into a grimacing Lee Oswald in Dallas.
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tal, where President Kennedy and Oswald were pronounced dead those dark days of November, 1963.)

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Having considered intense, portly stars for Ruby—Ed Asner in particular—Stuart chose for his ghetto-born killer Lerner, the ghetto-bred performer from Brooklyn's low-income Redhood Housing Project. "That's where I grew up," he chuckles with pride only half mocked, "after such notables as Sandy Koufax and Paul Sorvino.

"When I did the screen test for CBS," he recalls, "it became apparent to me that instinctively I was doing things that were Jack Ruby. Then, afterwards, when I started to talk to Earl and Sam Ruby, they were saying to me things like, 'That's just the way Jack talked.' "

How did the "sensitive Fulbright scholar"—he studied at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art during the 1960s—play Jack Ruby?

He read the few available biographies and underlined the paradoxes he found in Ovid Demaris' and Gary Wills' "Jack Ruby": "He usually did the wrong thing for reaching his goal; wanted to help, and he only got in the way."

"I could relate to my father (in the junk trade, on the lower East Side of Manhattan). I could relate to Willie Loman (the protagonist of 'Death of a Salesman'). As a character, he's a very identifiable type, Jack Ruby, a kind of ghetto Jew trying to make it, a loser, not really having the character to make it, wanting class, all that stuff.

" 'Jack—what a character!' " Lerner quotes Sam Ruby, " 'Meshugeneh.' The Ruby brothers are blind to the unsavory parts of Jack's character, but I think that's fair. They see him as a character, but I wanted all the time to show both sides, the guy who is 'meshugeneh,' very emotional, violent, partly gangster, and then the other side, which is sweet, a good guy, wanting to be liked, a real 'bubbie.' Even when I'm violent, I wanted to show insecurity.

"I work on a character by doing a lot of research and all that," says this actor with an affinity for political roles. (In addition to Ruby he played Pierre Salinger in "The Missiles of October," a "Frank Mankiewicz-type" speechwriter in "The Candidate" and a bigot in "Alex in Wonderland.") "But really good work is when you can forget all that stuff—after you've done it, forget it all and just be. So the shooting of Oswald for me was the purest moment of my being Jack Ruby in the sense that I wasn't acting: I wasn't thinking about my beat, about my motivation. I was just doing it. The way it will probably come across—hopefully—the audience will be in doubt whether it's premeditated or impulsive. I tried to play Ruby confused by me not being confused."

For the scene in which Ruby hears of the President's death on his car radio, Lerner plays it as a man wracked by a feeling that starts deep inside and works outward. We are concerned for him, not for our own sad memories of that day. Stuart terms the result "realistic. He starts to sob. I've never heard sobbing like that in a man before. From whatever depth, from whatever problems he ever had, you're experiencing sobs—not tears, but gut-wrenching cries.

"He is an actor capable of going outside the norm. It's what I assume they would do if they had great taste in the Yiddish Art Theater. It's the Yiddish Art Theater with exquisite control and 1977 taste where people are expressing these emotions without all that overkill. It's realistic, but it's the same openness and 'shreying' (Yiddish for lamenting). You haven't seen that lately. It's all Charlie's Angels and Police Story. Nobody is really crazy anymore." ●

Tuchman is a West Coast writer for Film Comment.

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● DALLAS—"How does a sensitive Fulbright scholar play someone as mixed up as Jack Ruby?" actor Michael Lerner asked rhetorically, having just completed the role in a TV movie called "Ruby and Oswald" to air over CBS later this season. It is a meticulous, dramatic reenactment of those four days in Dallas that ended with the deaths of President John F. Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald.

Lerner was sitting in a Dallas delicatessen sharing bagels with Earl Ruby, Jack's brother. "No one can appreciate your performance more than I," said Earl Ruby, reassuring him, "because I knew how my brother acted and his reflexes and how he moved. You so resemble my brother that it's hard to believe that you can do that without having seen him. You never saw him, right?"

No, Lerner never saw him.

"Yet you walk like him. Even the way you move your mouth."

Realism, in fact, presents more paradoxes than it resolves. Two TV movies, "Ruby and Oswald" and ABC's recent "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," are each realistic yet distinct. Even within a single production, director and star, Mel Stuart and Lerner, with differing notions of realism, squabbled daily to a draw.

"Ruby and Oswald" is part of TV's 14-year-old documentarylike "coverage" of the Dallas events. Like memorials to the President assembled from stock footage and investigative reports like CBS' "Inquiry: The Warren Report," in June, 1967, "Ruby and Oswald" tries to replicate events, never deviating from the official conclusions contained in the Warren Report.

"The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," on the other hand, largely based on the same report, was part of the collection of querulous motion pictures, such as "Rush to Judgment," "Executive Action" and the aborted "Countdown in Dallas" that challenged the government's conclusions, usually by reinterpreting the government's own evidence in light of one or several conspiracy theories.

Both networks, generally respected for responsible journalism (although the makers of "Rush to Judgment" have charged that CBS threatened to destroy outtakes from its relevant news coverage), required that the scripts of these "docudramas" be checked for accuracy by their news departments. Not surprisingly, both films, shooting in Dallas within weeks of each other, used identical locations, local actors and extras, similar props and even some of the same authenticated dialogue.

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Stuart is no stranger to the Kennedy film genre, having assembled "The Making of the President 1960" (which was broadcast in 1964 over CBS), supervised the memorial "A Thousand Days" (filmed for the Democratic National Committee) and within months of the President's death directed United Artists' documentary, "Four Days in November." Today he candidly recognizes how simple it is to slip inadvertently away from vaunted fact.

"Four Days in November" was marred by a sweeping musical score, a tendentious commentary and tacky reenactments purporting to show events from Oswald's furtive point of view or Ruby's wavering glare. "Ruby and Oswald" contains neither music nor commentary, and all but a few of the images from the earlier reenactments are gone.

Stuart's resolve to become the filmmaker of record in the Kennedy case required the banishment of all but authenticated details. His Dallas policemen wear replicas of Dallas police force badges. (ABC's wore prop badges of the security guard variety.) When Oswald was being interrogated during the days following the assassination, officers from four agencies were always present—the FBI, the Secret Service, the Dallas Police Department and a U.S. postal inspector concerned with the mail-order rifle. Only when the officers' recollections of the interrogation, as reported in the Warren Commission Report, were unanimous did Stuart use it in the script.

His zeal engendered among his cast and crew a competitive spirit with regard to "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," a spirit with almost palpable moral overtones. He hotly protested the sort of "malarkey" he found in a "borrowed" copy of ABC's shooting script, fearing young people might regard it as factual. "May God punish you for your sins, Larry Schiller!" he cursed its supervising producer at the end of a long day's painstaking re-creation of Oswald's murder in the basement of the Dallas police station. "Ruby and Oswald" was to be a purgative of the other film's supposed llberties.

(Richard Freed, producer of "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," admits that there was similarly a competitive feeling at ABC, but that concerned gaining the audience's attention first by scheduling the earlier air date.)

Content though Stuart may be to let facts speak for themselves, "Ruby and Oswald" projects the hypothesis that most conspiracy theorists reject: that a "nobody" working by himself could kill a President of the United States. "I know that Lee Harvey Oswald killed the President," Stuart affirms. "I do not know whether he acted because somebody called him at 4 o'clock in the morning. I won't go that far. Until somebody proves differently, I take it for a fact that he was a nut like Sirhan Sirhan or Arthur Bremmer or the guy who shot McKinley." Madness is the conclusion.

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And madness could be read into the reminiscences of Ruby's friends and relatives, too, gathered by CBS at a Dallas "wrap" party. Ruby the gentleman, Ruby the patriot, Ruby the fighter who might have been champ—"like King Kong in the first place," said Andy Anderson, Ruby's bartender at the Carousel Club, describing his boss's swing-first-think-second style when kicking rowdies downstairs.

Ruby the fighter was, as brother Earl recalls, "a dedicated Jew . . . When he was younger, when they had the Nazi Bund meetings in Chicago, he would go and break them up. Man, there was a lot of blood spilled. They would go break up the meetings and break a few heads. When we here in the United States first learned what Hitler was doing, Jack wanted to go over and kill Hitler. I discouraged him. I said, 'How are you going to get there? You don't even speak German. You don't look German. You'll never get near him.' Really, he was serious. That's the way he was.

"On one occasion when he was in the service, he was at the Glass Hat Cocktail Lounge in the Congress Hotel in Chicago. He was in uniform and he heard a lieutenant in uniform at the opposite end of the bar talking about the war and saying, 'When the Jews get through making all their money, they'll call the war off.' My brother goes over and says, 'What did you say?' 'You heard what I said.' So my brother hit him once and knocked him cold.

"Barney Ross told me that had Jack gone into the ring, he would have been a champion."

Noted Earl's wife, Marge, "Jack didn't count to 10."

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Meeting at Phil's, a delicatessen that Ruby frequented, Lerner observed to Earl and Marge Ruby, "Deli is an antidote to Dallas." Then, hefting something that did seem sadly soft like a bun, he complained, "These are such 'goyische' bagels."

Earl reminded him, "Dallas is a 'goyische' town."

It is surely not Chicago. The Jewish community in Dallas is small and dispersed. Ruby felt isolated there. (Later from prison he phoned his sister-in-law almost every day and in Yiddish asked if her children were safe, if the Jews had been exterminated. Ruby died at age 55 from cancer at Parkland Memorial Hospi-

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